

## **A MESSAGE FROM SECRETARY OF LABOR ELAINE L. CHAO**

Dear SIU Members,

I want to extend my sincere appreciation to each of you for valiantly doing your part to support U.S. troops in Operation Iraqi Freedom. While the war against terrorism continues, President George W. Bush has declared the end of major combat operations in Iraq. The United States and our allies prevailed in our fight to liberate the people of Iraq and end the threat Saddam Hussein posed to world peace and security.

A strong U.S.-flag fleet was crucial to the success of Operation Iraqi Freedom. More than 5,000 U.S. merchant mariners voluntarily put themselves in harm's way to transport much-needed equipment and supplies to our troops serving in Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi Freedom. Many of you are still at work-transporting food and machinery to feed the Iraqi people and rebuild their country. Thank you for the great sacrifice each of you makes every day to serve your country and to protect the American dream.

The American dream has always been at the heart of the U.S. Merchant Marine. In fact, there was an American merchant marine before there was an American nation. The story of our merchant mariners and their contributions to our nation is one of heroism and sacrifice. Paul Hall knew that and wanted American seamen to have the very best of everything. He wanted SIU members to have an opportunity to advance. He was also concerned about the next generation of American seamen and wanted young people to have the opportunity to start a career at sea.

Consistent with Paul Hall's vision, President Sacco and I recently developed and approved the first ever National Apprenticeship Standards for the maritime industry. This will be a new program offered at the Paul Hall Center for Maritime Training and Education. The program will include apprenticeship training for the occupations of Able Seaman, Firer Marine, and Chief Cook. These apprenticeship programs range from 2,760 to 4,000 hours of on-the-job training supplemented by instruction in the classroom. The Paul Hall Center apprenticeship program will be a competency-based training program that meets U.S. Coast Guard Certification requirements.

Applicants accepted and registered as apprentices must meet the following minimum qualifications:

- Must be at least 18 years old (at least 17 years old with parental consent);
- Must be able to comply with the physical fitness standards of the Seafarers Health and Benefits Plan, be free of drug and alcohol issues, and be able to pass a drug screen test;
- Must have either a high school diploma (or GED equivalency) or pass a standardized test that will demonstrate the applicant's ability to benefit from the program; and

- Must be able to meet all U.S. Coast Guard established criteria for the issuance of a merchant mariner's document and be free of convictions by any court for violations of the law that would disqualify an applicant from obtaining merchant mariners documents from the U.S. Coast Guard.

The educational opportunities available at the Paul Hall Center demonstrate the Seafarers' unsurpassed commitment to quality. Your training center has earned the admiration of government agencies and the maritime industry. The new apprenticeship program created by the cooperative efforts of the U.S. Department of Labor and the SIU will advance our shared goal of increasing the number of highly skilled, American seamen.

Thank you for all you are doing for this great country and smooth sailing,

Elaine L. Chao  
U.S. Secretary of Labor